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The Soviet Change

The single most important question facing the United States now that a coup has overthrown Khrushchev is whether Soviet foreign policy will undergo radical changes. This seems highly unlikely.

Khrushchev's desire to ease tensions with the United States even at the cost of schisms with Communist China was not the result of mere whim, impetuosity, or personal preference. It was the result of domestic and foreign imperatives which will continue to set limits on Soviet policy alternatives long after Khrushchev is gone from the scene. It is these imperatives which explain why Khrushchev himself, after having attacked Malenkov for his consumers goods-detente line, soon adopted the Malenkov position. And it is these imperatives which explain why no China lobby exists in the Kremlin calling for bold new moves against the West.

One of the basic facts of Soviet life is the U.S.S.R.'s strategic inferiority to the West. This in-

feriority cannot be quickly overcome even if, as seems highly improbable, the new Russian leadership embarks on a crash military program. Another important reality is the balance of terror which militates against Soviet brinkmanship and for closer relations with the United States. Khrushchev's successors are not any more likely than he was to risk annihilation of the Soviet Union over Berlin and they are even less likely to do so for Mao's objectives in Taiwan or Ho Chi Min's in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union and the United States continue to share a common interest in reducing the danger of nuclear war and in preventing nuclear proliferation.

At home the Soviets urgently need to continue the process of modernizing and making more efficient the Soviet government and economy. A succession of party and economic reorganizations have created administrative chaos. Soviet agriculture is in extremely bad shape, total grain production last year having been no more than it was in 1957. While industrial performance has improved, annual rates of growth have declined and perhaps more important, earlier great expectations have not been fulfilled. There are competing demands on scarce resources. At the same time, strong pressures both within and outside the party are pushing for more extensive liberalization and de-Stalinization; the new leaders may be able better to respond to these pressures than Khrushchev could because they are not personally stained with Stalin's crimes. Such considerations will continue to dictate a cautious foreign policy.

Indeed in the long run, the new generation of Soviet leaders represented by the 57-year-old Brezhnev is quite likely to walk even more softly in the international arena than did Khrushchev. These new leaders are technocrats and organization men rather than ideologues. They are relatively inexperienced in and, one suspects, uninterested in foreign affairs. Their main objective is to get the obsolete and anachronistic Soviet system to work efficiently. It must have been apparent to such men long ago that extensive new gains for Soviet communism were unlikely, extremely risky and possibly undesirable since Communist parties in power no longer automatically serve Soviet interests.